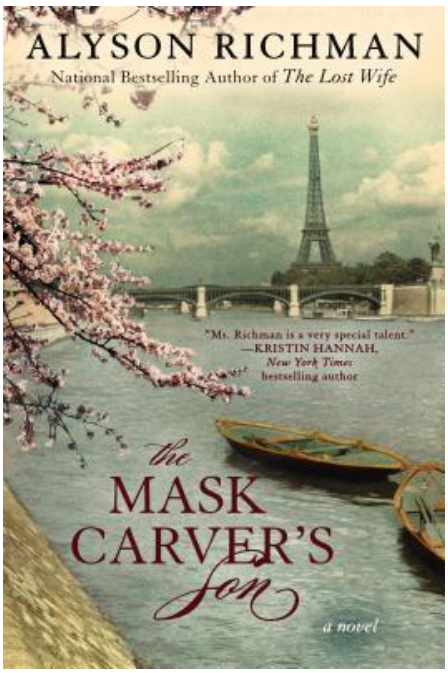

The Mask Carver's Son

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The Mask Carver's Son Alyson Richman
1890. Yamamoto Kiyoki is a Japanese art student, dreaming of studying in Paris with the inspiring and vibrant Impressionist painters.

Yamamoto Ryusei is Kiyoki's father. Ryusei's art, carving intricate masks for traditional Japanese theater, has been his refuge from loneliness since the death of his beloved wife, and he is revered as the most inspired artist of his kind. He expects his only son to honor the traditions of his family and his country, not to be seduced by Western ideas of what is beautiful. Ryusei hopes Kiyoki will follow his own distinguished career, creating masks that will become the family's crowning achievement.

But what is a father to do when his son's path is not what he had planned? And how can a son honor his father, and yet fulfill his own destiny?

The Mask Carver's Son Details

Date	:	Published September 3rd 2013 by Berkley
ISBN	:	9780425267264
Author	:	Alyson Richman
Format	:	Paperback 384 pages
Genre	:	Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Japan, Fiction, Art, France

From Reader Review The Mask Carver's Son for online ebook

Rob says

Another instance in which I was persuaded to buy a book based on reader's reviews.
From my perspective the plot moved along slower than glue.
And I never did feel much sympathy for the main character which
left me wondering - what kind of readers this book was for?
I gave it a two star rating for while I did not particularly care for the book
it was written quite decently.

For readers of the "Lost Wife," this book does not come close to generating
the interest or the same level of quality that book held.

Cherie says

I wanted to like this book more. 3.5 stars is more like how I felt about it. I truly enjoyed the first half of the story and if the rest of the book had remained consistent, I would have been thrilled to give it 5 stars.

There were some annoying editing issues in a few places that were distracting and I couldn't keep myself from expecting more. (There weren't though.)

The Japanese art history felt very well researched and I was fascinated with the history of Noh and the masks and their carving. I watched numerous videos on You Tube about the masks and costumes and dance performances.

The main character's drive to be an artist and his journey to study art in France was disappointing and somewhat disjointed from his early story, which was beautifully written.

Azabu says

Post Meiji family saga -- greatly enjoyed but I wonder if you can call a little boy chan? Always thought it was 'kun' so I have reservations about accuracy.

Tocotin says

Want your book to be considered DEEP by default? Set it in Japan.

Bonus points if you don’t use contractions, don’t let the characters interact or even speak much, and change scene every four sentences, even if nothing is happening. And if you happen to know what Wikipedia is, you

can write a historical novel!

This is one of those books. In addition to the stuff listed above, the plot doesn't make much sense. So there is a family of noh actors – or actor, his wife and daughter – living in a social vacuum so absolute that they accept a mask carver, who appeared from nowhere – literally nowhere, a forest where he was trained by a monk named Tamashii ("Soul" – talk about cheesy names) – so they accept this absolute stranger and give him the daughter. Why? Do they live in the wilderness? Is there a dearth of young guys there? Hell no, it's the long-suffering Kyoto! But you see, the dad accepts the guy because he recognized his great talent:

"Grandfather knew this carver was empowered with a gift far greater than even his own acting ability. He pondered the young man before him and then found his concentration shifting to his daughter. With no heir to carry on the Yamamoto name, he marveled at the idea of a possible family union." [The young guy has no family to speak of, by the way.]

Then the mask carver sort of shows his son – the eponymous hero of the novel – that he's disappointed because the son didn't follow in his footsteps, but became a painter instead. This is, I think, the focus of the story. The whole situation is not even remotely Japanese.

There is also a lame subplot featuring poisonous plums – I didn't understand it at all, underripe plums lethal? really? – obviously it is there for the plot to work, that is, to make characters suffer. This passive, nonsensical suffering seems to replace character development in DEEP books like this one. A family member or a lover dies or is otherwise removed from the plot, and nothing much happens beside that, but it sets the tone; the main character decides that there's no joy left in this world and acts accordingly, mainly by ignoring everyone else or holding them in contempt. He or she will, however, randomly notice the beauty of nature.

Despite the Meiji-period setting, it's a stiff version of modern Japan. The lack of detail and faulty research was nearly unbearable for me. I kept picturing these characters in cramped 1 LDK Japanese apartments:

"Well, I am not sure of your schedule, but next Thursday my wife Chieko is planning to teach our daughter to prepare *chawanmushi*. Should you have the time, we would be delighted to have you join us."

This is not even Meiji, it's Edo period. The guy speaking is a noh patriarch, who should have a huge household with lots of servants, family, and pupils, and barely be aware that his womenfolk exist. He's talking to a young man he's never seen before, a man who has no family and no past, offering to show him his marriageable daughter, mentioning his wife's name. It's also painfully obvious that the author has never seen a traditional Japanese kitchen. But scratch this – a few pages later the reader is treated to a depiction of a ceremonial *o-miai* introduction. I guess they couldn't get the eggs for the *chawanmushi*.

There are a lot of eye-rolling anachronisms, stereotypes, and outright blunders. There are slippers, there are tables. There is old, tired stuff about women's neck being oh so erotic. People ride in carriages to a shrine for a Shinto marriage ceremony. Women constantly take down their hair. Wooden houses are heated throughout the night by charcoal braziers – this one is really maddening. The hero's mother, the young woman of the *chawanmushi*, is of course an artist herself and goes alone to paint her favorite mountain or something, and stays there till dusk (her dad complains that "she should be concentrating more on her tea ceremony than on those ink drawings" – hahaha!), because, wait for it, her son had to inherit her talent! Tokyo is this horribly modern place:

"All around Tokyo, from the elaborate construction of the Kabuki Theater in the Ginza to the Ministry of Justice Building in Kasumigaseki, Japanese architecture could no longer be distinguished from the structures

of Europe. [Kabuki-za is a really bad example of this, since it was rebuilt in a distinctively Japanese style.] It seemed as though Greek Revival and Italian Renaissance had replaced wood and shoji. [is shoji another building material, like wood?] I would soon grow accustomed to seeing my reflection in the pane of leaded glass, no longer my silhouette on rice paper."

It's also smelly: "I recalled my first smells of Tokyo: the rank stench of the fermenting *natto*, the heavy grease frying the tempura, and the fish skins roasting on the fire." LIKE KYOTO SMELLED DIFFERENTLY

By the way, I wonder what kimono exactly looks like, because: "In a kimono one can hide nothing, and so it was easy to see the line of his skeleton, the curve of his back, and the sinews of his muscles."

"The melody of the Japanese, however, was continually broken by a strange word – *impureshunisumu*. Takada could not discern whether it was a French word or just a word that he was unfamiliar with in his own language. He soon realized that the word *impureshunisumu* was in fact the word "Impressionism" converted into a Japanese word." – This is a reminder that not all foreign concepts in Japanese language are loanwords. Impressionism is ????, *insh?shugi*, or ???, *insh?ha*.

There is one more thing, and it's sort of big. There is a lot about noh theatre, but in that time noh was called sarugaku – not noh.

And of course Meiji Restoration was evil, evil, evil. Good people were traditionalists, bad people valued progress and Westernization. I've had enough of this cheap, ignorant, pedestrian, simplistic concept. It's ubiquitous in historical books about Japan. It needs to die a painful death.

I'm tired.

But you know what, it's still not the worst book about Japan I've read. That would be "The Painting" by Nina Schuyler. I finished it about a month ago. I'm still licking my wounds. Review to come.

Carrie says

This book was a huge disappointment--if I were a book quitter, I'd have quit this one a dozen different times. Perhaps my expectations were too high--I've absolutely loved all of Alyson Richman's other books that I've read. This one, however, just never hooked me.

The book was very sad--start to finish, just incredibly depressing, with really no redemption at all, at any point in the story. I never felt a sense of sympathy for the main character, I mostly just thought he made a lot of poor decisions, then felt sorry for himself for what followed. It was also just a really slow book--the first probably quarter of the book inched along painfully.

I wish I had at least one positive thing to say about this book, but I just really don't.

Brandon Shire says

This is one of those books you horde, keeping it to yourself to read again and again.
Recommended.

C.W. says

Sometimes, you read a novel that haunts you long after the last page has been turned. For me, THE MASK CARVER'S SON is one of those rare gifts.

With an elegiac air and consummate elegance of prose, author Alyson Richman depicts Japan and Paris in the late 1800s through the eyes of Yamamoto Kiyoki, the titular son of a gifted but tormented mask carver marked by tragedy, who finds refuge in the ancient customs of the Japanese theater. Yearning to study the new modes of painting embodied by the Impressionists in Paris, Kiyoki finds himself caught between his seemingly impossible dreams and the rigid traditions that his emotionally remote father and patriarchal grandfather uphold, though their form of life is slowly going extinct as Japan shrugs aside its cultural isolation to embrace Westernization.

Kiyoki is a challenging character - a young man so enthralled by the power of art and its ability to mold the spirit that he proves unable to control its destructive influence over his life. It's a testament to Ms Richman's skill that she can bring us fully into Kiyoki's heart and mind, when he himself understands so little of the impulses that will both transform and shatter him.

After Kiyoki abandons everything that binds him to Japan in order to pursue his dreams, he arrives in Paris under the glories of its artistic fervor. Here, he finds fulfillment as an artist but remains estranged from the very world he seeks to conquer, haunted by the lover he has left behind, whom, abetted by their distance, he has dangerously come to idolize.

His quest to reconcile his divided loyalties and retain the purity of his work take him, and us, on an emotional journey through the garrets and salons of Paris and back to the soil that has nurtured Kiyoki's talent, posing the question of how much must we sacrifice to safeguard the obsessive infatuation and innocence of our artistic endeavors.

This beautifully crafted novel offers an answer that is both heartrending and inspiring.

Marita says

> ”**I wore my destiny like a too-tight robe in which I could not breathe. Each thread of fabric was woven by an ancestor, the color chosen by fingers not my own.**”

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Yamamoto Kiyoki is born in Daigo, Kyoto. Kiyoke’s maternal grandfather, like his ancestors, is a renowned Noh actor. Yamamoto Yuji is delighted to have Yamamoto Ryusei as his son-in-law and adopted son as Ryusei has distinguished himself as an exceptional carver of Noh masks, arguably the best carver of his time.

> "Three pictures of the same female mask showing how the expression changes with a tilting of

the head." (Wikipedia)

It is not surprising then that Kiyoki's future is decided for him before he is even born. As soon as his mother announced her pregnancy, her father declared: *""And as it is with so much pride and joy that I look upon this day, I hope that my grandson will live to become as great a mask carver as his father!" He lowered his gaze to Father and raised his cup. "With great anticipation do I look forward to the day that Mother and I can bestow on him his first set of chisels.""* It is expected and taken for granted that Kiyoke will follow in his father's footsteps to become a mask carver.

However, that is not Kiyoke's wish. According to him "there was nothing less interesting than a block of wood". What excites him is colour and depth of field. He wants to paint. In fact he wants to learn to paint in the new Impressionist style that has been introduced to Japan during the Meiji period when Japan opened its doors to the West. Westerners became enamoured of anything Japanese, but at the same time new techniques, ideas and art forms were introduced to Japan. It is actually the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer who initially inspires Kiyoke: *"I can still remember the ricocheting pangs of excitement I felt as I studied those first reproduced images. The first painting remains branded into my memory, its image pressed into the stone palimpsest of my mind: Dürer's Self-portrait with a Thistle."*

Ultimately Kiyoke has to decide whether to meet his family's expectations or to follow his own aspirations which include studying art in France. Where Kiyoke's family and their friends despise Westernization, Kiyoke and his friends embrace it. He and his fellow students in Japan pore over images of Delacroix, Corot and Ingres, and *"We would nearly cry with envy when we saw the first reproductions of the Impressionists—Manet, Monet, Morisot. We memorized their names until they fell from our ears like notes from a well-known symphony."*

This remarkable debut novel is a complex tale of loss, sorrow, expectations, sacrifice, alienation, guilt and the determination to follow a dream. It deals with a period of great change in which Japan was being modernised and in which East and West, old and new converge and collide. Kiyoke and his friends have to learn to cope with a changing world, with derision from traditionalists, and to adapt to being regarded as neither Japanese nor as French people. *"'We styled ourselves as Europeans, but in such a flawless manner that, in the end, we tried too hard and failed. I realized much later that we had succeeded only in looking more Japanese, and more out of place, than ever.""*

Kiyoke is an interesting character. He tries desperately to capture the love of his father, but Ryusei who suffers from his own sorrows gives all his time and love to his masks. In the process Kiyoke himself learns to withdraw, to observe rather than to participate, and to draw what he sees. He feels abandoned, and in turn he abandons his roots to go to France. Kiyoke has to learn to deal with loss, haunting memories, feelings of guilt and of inadequacy. Ironically, it is in France where he will always be a foreigner that he is successful and where his work is accepted. It is also in France that there is freedom from certain expectations.

The novel is well researched, and it is infused with art (both Japanese and Western) and Noh music theatre. There are marvellous descriptions, amongst other for example the scene of his departure and of Mount Daigo. There are several verbal images of plums and plum trees, but discover the significance for yourselves. I have endeavoured to disclose no more of the plot than what is revealed in the book's blurb on GR.

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Here are some quotes (in spoiler tags):

(view spoiler)

Diane says

Kiyoki is the son of Yamamoto Ryusei, a master carver of *Noh* masks, and Etsuko, the only child of a famous *Noh* actor. Etsuko dies giving birth to Kiyoki. Her death devastates the family, especially Ryusei. Already aloof and almost otherwordly, he withdraws even more into himself. Kiyoki is raised largely by his devoted grandmother. He grows up in an atmosphere steeped in art and drama - the *Noh* theater of his grandfather and the almost magical *Noh* masks created by his father, who is acclaimed a master at an early age.

Ryusei wants his son to follow in his footsteps and become a carver of *Noh* masks. However, Kiyoki has no interest in carving. Like his mother, he prefers to draw. It is his discovery of western art when he is a teenager that finally convinces him to become an artist:

> "I was going to be a Western-style painter, for those were the paintings that I loved. The landscapes had depth, the figures had volume, and the palette was rich and varied. I would not be like my father, with his ashen masks, I secretly told myself. I was born on the cusp of a new age."

The relationship of Kiyoki and Ryusei is poignant. As Kiyoki says, "Silence, it seems, was our curse." Ryusei is drawn into himself and his art. He has difficulty expressing his feelings, even for his only son. He has lost his parents, his older brother, his wife, and his in-laws. His son is all he has left. Perhaps his attempt to train Kiyoki in the art of the mask carver is Ryusei's way of having a relationship with him. Maybe this is

his way of showing his love for his son.

However, Kiyoki's carving remains mediocre, though his painting of the *Noh* masks is masterful. He is determined to go his own way. Kiyoki will become a painter even if it breaks his father's heart.

> "I suppose somewhere deep in my heart, I wanted to wound my father. To punish him for not loving me more. For cowering from life. Once and for all to make him feel the impact of his blade.
>
> As I had lived my childhood in its mirror.

"The Mask Carver's Son" is a beautifully written tale of a father and son, whose artistic styles are worlds apart, but whose passion for their art is very much the same. Kiyoki and Ryusei are both sympathetic, interesting characters I came to care about. I was sorry to reach the of the book. I will definitely be reading more of Alyson Richman's work.

Florence Primrose says

In 1880 Kiyoki’s father wants him to be a mask carver as is his dad in Kyoto. But by 1890 he is a Japanese art student studying in Paris. He has always been strongly drawn to painting as his mother was.

His father wants him to honor the traditions of his family and country and not be drawn to the Western ideas of what is beautiful. This is the story of the stresses for Kiyoki as he has been pressured to continue his father’s art and his own desires.

Sara says

I enjoyed the flow of this author’s writing. It was a quick, enjoyable read overall. The main character was really easy to empathize with as you followed him through the excellently researched world of Noh theater and turn of the century Paris art scene. The conflicts of culture and family were relatable and carried the story through the years.

Lisa Miller says

Richman writes beautifully.
I have loved all of her books. This one, though different, left me with the same sense of satisfaction and true appreciation of her talent.

Rachel says

I have read all of her books now. This was my least favorite. It was very sad and there was little redemption. She is still a very engaging author and I like her style.

Erika says

I must be one of the few who didn't enjoy this book. I found it tedious and whiny

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Sherry says

I ended up liking this much more than I liked it at the beginning, which is unusual, since the beginning is about family relationships (which I typically enjoy) and the ending is more about art. But her writing grew on me. At first I thought it was too "pretty" but then I think it loosened up, or maybe I did. I thought the main character's transition was well-done, and I loved the parts about Paris.

Gary Inbinder says

In her debut novel,Alyson Richman produced a brilliant narrative of the artist as marginalized other, the soul behind the mask. Set in Meiji Era (1867-1912) Japan and France at the time of the Impressionists, the narrative reveals the protagonist's estrangement and isolation, first as an artist drawn to the West, which alienates him from his father and his traditional culture, as a Gay man, which alienates him from a straight society, and as an Easterner in the West. Moreover, he is an artist everywhere in a world that commodifies art, valuing it according to its marketability and price tag.

Ms. Richman tells her compelling tale with an eye to detail(she knows her subject and the historical period), psychological complexity, and elegant prose. All in all, an outstanding first novel.

Lisa says

I just read another sad story.... I need to find a wonderful chic book to pull me up. This was a well-written book by Alyson Richman (she also wrote "The Lost WIfe"), but the story is so sad. Richman has a very pleasant way of writing. Her words just flow along the pages telling her story in such a soft, quiet way.

This book is about Kiyoki (name means pure wood), the son of a famous Noh mask carver. In the Noh theatre, tradition is that the son will fall into the same line of work as the father. Kiyoki has other dreams, though; to be a Western style painter, and follows his dream to Paris where he experiences freedoms he has never had. He sacrifices his family for this, along with love to pursue his dream.

The story takes place at the turn of the century and was inspired from real life stories. It was very interesting learning what Japan and Paris were like at this time.

Shomeret says

This is one of the best novels I've read dealing with artists. It involves what art means to artists, and different cultural approaches to art. In Japan before the 20th century, art was family and tradition based. In the West artists are individuals. They are expected to be original rather than adhere to the type of art their family or tradition produces. Kiyoki, the central character, thinks like a Westerner about art. He totally misunderstands his father. There are some high costs involved in family misunderstandings in this novel.

The book is very well written and dramatically intense. There were parts of this novel when I had tears just streaming down my face.

Michael says

I really enjoyed Richman's earlier novels but this one left me perplexed. There were not any highlights in this book, the writing style was trite in contrast to lovely (in her previous books), no character development or consistent plot. I initially thought that it will grow on me like some of her novels but it got worse as it progressed. I can't say that I won't read more novels by her but I do hope that the next novel is much better than this one. If there is one thing positive I can say about this novel was that it started of promising but it left me hanging in the end.

Lisa says

This tale of, well, a mask carver's son, takes place in turn-of-the-century Japan. It's an interesting look at what art was like during this time, and how someone like Kiyoki struggles against tradition and society's mores. At times, it felt like I was reading a textbook, and overall, Kiyoki's tale begs the question: Is it worth pursuing true passion at the cost of everything else?
